

Sheeple Chase
Episode 6 – [Unreleased] Magnus Opus

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1. INT. TWO URBAN FLATS (GEORGIE'S PC)

CELIA and GEORGIE are remote recording badly.

The audio is lower quality as though unedited. It starts unceremoniously without music or credits.

CAPTAIN BARKER boofs in the background.

GEORGIE
Recording?

CELIA
Yup.

GEORGIE
Ok. Three, two, one...

They both clap.

GEORGIE
Hello and welcome to Sheep-
(to Celia)
Sorry, hang on.
(to dog)
Hey, we talked about this. If you're
going to be in here when I'm
recording, you've got to stay quiet.

CAPTAIN BARKER settles.

CELIA
We good?

GEORGIE
Yeah, sorry.

Beat. GEORGIE clears her throat and then:

GEORGIE

Hello and welcome to Sheeple Chase, the conspiracy theory podcast one reviewer called "a great sleep aid on overnight flights." I'm Georgie Barker-

CELIA

-and I'm Celia Ripley. So, Georgie, what deep conspiracy cuts do you have for us this week?

GEORGIE

Well, after giant hairdos and massive cocaine piles of New Coke last week, I thought I would change pace with something a little weirder.

(Narrating)

We've all heard tales about psychic children, mind control and otherworldly beings but what if they weren't just stories, and what if there was an group dedicated to uncovering these mysteries only to hoard their secrets right under our very noses?

CELIA

(wary)

Georgie?

GEORGIE

Today we're going to be talking about the enigmatic "Magnus Institute", a supposed research centre for ancient philosophy and science, but which many people believe was up to something much more sinister...

Beat.

GEORGIE

Celia?

CELIA

Oh er, cool.

GEORGIE

Are you all right? Do you need to check on Jack?

CELIA

...no. No I'm fine.

GEORGIE

You sure?

CELIA

(steadier)

Yeah, I'm fine, let's get this one done before he wakes up.

GEORGIE claps into the mic.

GEORGIE

(cont.)

But before that, let's hear a word from our sponsors.

GEORGIE claps again.

GEORGIE

Good to go?

CELIA

(no)

Yup.

GEORGIE

So, the first record I can find of the Institute is in a footnote of the minutes of a meeting of the Royal Society which lists it as having been

founded in 1818 Edinburgh by a guy called Jonah Magnus. After that it seems to disappear until 1826 where it turns up in a Manchester rate book owned by the Magnus family-

CELIA

Sorry, a rate book?

GEORGIE

Oh, it's basically a log of every property in an area and how much tax needs to be paid on it. The Magnus Institute's listed as owned by the Magnus family who seemed to be mill magnates with more money than ethics, but it's categorised under "Other."

Beat.

CELIA

Which means... something?

GEORGIE

Well, it's not like there was a drop-down menu of categories. People would write-in saying what it was for but that means whoever did the survey asks Jonah Magnus "what type of building is it?" and he just says "*other*". Which is weird!

CELIA

Maybe the survey guy was just a bit of a jobsworth? I've definitely had days where I'd just write 'Other' on a form rather than think about it.

GEORGIE

Maybe, but it's also weird that the Institute was mentioned by the Royal Society but there's no record of the Institute publishing anything or even hosting a lecture. What's the point of a scientific institute that doesn't do any science?

CELIA

Tax dodge?

GEORGIE

Maybe, but then why would Charles Babbage bother to name check Mr Magnus in *Reflections on the Decline of Science in England*, accusing him of "squandering his passable intellect on fancies of sorcery, alchemy and worse."

CELIA

Sounds like he was jealous of all that tax-dodge money.

GEORGIE

Perhaps if it was just about the founder but the weirdness lasts all the way into the 1990s with *Daily Star* headline: "BIG BANG THEORY: 12 BOFFINS DEAD IN RESEARCH HQ BLOW-UP"

CELIA

What's that?

GEORGIE

The *Manchester Evening News* and *The Times* both reported on an explosion which seems pretty weird for an institute dedicated to "other"

CELIA

Sure but from what I could gather it was just an old office building, all carpet tiles and faulty strip lighting that probably led to an electrical fire or something.

GEORGIE

You already know about this one?

CELIA

(reluctant)

I... read something on it a while back, that's all.

GEORGIE

Well it sounds like you missed all the juicy bits! It seems the fire service took six hours to arrive! There was an inquiry but it never went anywhere as nobody from the Institute was ever heard from again!

CELIA

Because they'd died! Look Georgie I'll grant you the historic stuff could be interesting but focusing on the fire like this just seems a bit...

GEORGIE

What?

CELIA

I don't know... ghoulish?

Beat.

GEORGIE

Why don't we have another word from our sponsor?

CELIA

Sure.

GEORGIE claps.

GEORGIE

Something you want to talk about?

CELIA

Not really.

GEORGIE

Celia?

Beat.

CELIA

**Look I'm sorry I said it was ghoulish
but I'm not super comfortable with
this one.**

GEORGIE

**Why not? We talk about deaths all
the time? What about the dead
celebrities episode you did?**

CELIA

**No, I know but those were all just
daft theories this is... real.**

GEORGIE

**Okay I get that but if we're going to
speculate about what's behind weird
stuff we're going to have to at least
mention some of the darker stuff.**

CELIA

Fine, I get it.

GEORGIE

You sure?

CELIA

Yeah let's just get on with it before
Jack wakes up.

GEORGIE

Okay.

GEORGIE claps.

GEORGIE

Welcome back.

CELIA

(brusque)

So we know the Magnus Institute
starts and ends weirdly. What else
you got?

GEORGIE

(pressing on)

Well the Institute remained very quiet
- some would say secretive – from
1818 right through until Jonah
Magnus' death in 1848.

CELIA

Which I'm guessing you think was
some big coverup?

GEORGIE

Somehow I doubt that.

CELIA

Oh. How did he die?

GEORGIE

He was killed by a mob.

CELIA

I'm sorry what?

GEORGIE

Yeah, he was a mill owner in Salford in 1848.

CELIA

Meaning...?

GEORGIE

Come on Celia, the 1848 Chartist riots? The second Peterloo massacre? Peter two?

CELIA

(restrained)

Why don't you explain it. For your listeners.

GEORGIE

Er right, well the Chartists were a working-class movement in the 1830s and 40s who were involved in a bunch of riots and it wasn't unheard of for mill owners to find themselves and their families as targets.

CELIA

And you're saying this happened to Jonah Magnus?

GEORGIE

Yeah, he was beaten to death pretty publicly but the Institute survived and, without its founder, let's just say it started to get a little weird with it.

CELIA

Weird...how?

GEORGIE

There's not many records from those years but by the mid-nineteenth century they had started putting out requests for people to bring in "objects believed to be arcane, occult or esoteric in nature". Later they ask for people who claim to have supernatural abilities and eventually anyone who thinks they've had any sort of paranormal experience at all.

CELIA

So they were into séances like just about every Victorian ever?

GEORGIE

Oh almost certainly but it does have a cameo in an early Sexton Blake story where he references-

CELIA

Sorry what's Sexton Blake?

GEORGIE

He's pretty much like a knock-off Sherlock Holmes. He was a fictional detective popular with young working class lads. There's a reference in one of his stories to the 1884 burning man incident.

CELIA

The what?

GEORGIE

Ah, well eyewitnesses claim they saw a flaming man running out of the Magnus Institute, but each description of the man is different:

his height, age, even the colour of the flames.

CELIA

Who was he?

GEORGIE

Noone knows although one local paper mentions an "extensive twisting of the body" that left him unrecognisable.

CELIA

Jesus...

GEORGIE

Yeah it actually prompted a mini moral panic.

CELIA

What like the Magnus Institute was encouraging women to read, that kind of thing?

GEORGIE

Nothing so scandalous! Just a bit of devil-worship.

CELIA

Was there any evidence? Like ritual circles that kind of thing?

GEORGIE

Not really, mostly people just seemed to get a bad vibe. Oh and Alastair Crowley worked there for a year which didn't help.

CELIA

You don't sound particularly convinced?

GEORGIE

No. I want to be more convinced by this one because its so weird and fun, but secret, anti-worker devil-worshipping cults in Salford is just too far-fetched, even for me!

CELIA

So is there anyone who still believes any of this?

GEORGIE

Tough to say. It's big on some online forums.

CELIA

What isn't?

GEORGIE

True but there are some other theories about it.

CELIA

Like what?

GEORGIE

I mean, some people believe it's the Mancunian equivalent of the Men In Black-

CELIA

So Aliens again. In Central Manchester. Really?

GEORGIE

Aliens can be anywhere, Celia, you should know that! But fans of the alien theory tend to be focused more on what the Institute was up to in 70s and 80s.

CELIA

And what was that?

GEORGIE

Well that was the Institute's second boom period. The new-age rise in the 60s and 70s and all the LSD that entails meant a lot of agencies became a lot more open-minded when it came to research and The Magnus Institute was right in the thick of it.

CELIA

But like what kind of research?

GEORGIE

Well I'm not sure when it started but right up until it burned down, the Magnus Institute ran what must have been the world's most selective "gifted children" programme.

CELIA

What do you mean selective?

GEORGIE

That's the thing: they never really defined what "gifted" meant. They invited loads of kids to come and be tested for scholarships but they never said what the criteria were, and there's no record of them ever giving a single grant.

CELIA

Jesus, were the kids OK?

GEORGIE

I mean, mostly everyone just seemed disappointed. They interviewed kids from all over, imagine flying all the way from Japan with your whole family only to be told you aren't special.

CELIA

And parents just went for this?

GEORGIE

I suspect when you dangle words like "scholarship" a lot of parents just go with it.

CELIA

So what kind of tests were they being given?

GEORGIE

There's nothing official but according to accounts from the kids who got tested, they were straight out of a low-budget sci-fi: behavioural stuff, cognitive stuff, one person claimed they just handed her a series of items and asked how she felt when she was holding them.

CELIA

But they never gave any scholarships?

GEORGIE

Nope. I guess they never found anyone "gifted" enough.

CELIA

Or...there weren't any scholarships to begin with.

GEORGIE

Ah so you've stumbled onto another, and in my opinion more believable theory.

CELIA

And what's that?

GEORGIE

Academic fraud. Specifically, laundering money for the mob which would make a lot of sense given the institute's earlier focus on antiques.

CELIA

You think they were laundering money with the Mob all the way back to Jonah Magnus?

GEORGIE

God no. Most people who believe the money laundering theory reckon Jonah Magnus was actually just a rich eccentric with an expensive pet project but then the people who came in after used it as a front. Although it's not really clear who they were and that doesn't really scan with how it ended so abruptly. Most real organisations don't just...stop after a fire. Noone even tried to claim on the insurance.

CELIA

So what, you think the Mob were tying up a few loose ends?

GEORGIE

Could be, could be. So is that your conclusion? You're planting your flag on money laundering?

CELIA

It's certainly the more believable angle.

GEORGIE

I guess but I still can't help thinking it's some shady government shit!

CELIA

As always.

GEORGIE

Look governments were doing a lot of weird stuff in the 70s, Looking into the paranormal and all that, and I can absolutely believe the British government would set up their own secretive agency to work with them on it.

CELIA

Doing what exactly?

GEORGIE

Remember in the contrails episode? That army base that was secretly experimenting on the public?

CELIA

Porton something?

GEORGIE

Porton Down yeah! I think maybe the Magnus Institute was another one of those: a way for the government, or the military, to run experiments. Don't forget, after the fire, it took the firefighters six hours to get to the scene, in the middle of central Manchester! By the time they got there, the building was completely

annihilated but the Greater Manchester Fire Service never released a statement, or apologised, or anything. In fact, the only official agency that did apparently bother to show up was this tiny civil service department called the Office of Incident Assessment and Response.

CELIA

(interested)

The what?

GEORGIE

The Office of Incident Assessment and Response. I think they're an arm of the Office for National Statistics or something, there's not much public info about them.

CELIA

So what were they doing there?

GEORGIE

Assessing and Responding? Who knows?

CELIA

You said they're civil service, that means there has to be some record of what they do?

GEORGIE

According to their website, they "assess incidents and formulate official responses" and isn't that the most British Men In Black thing you ever heard?

CELIA
(distracted)
Sure.

GEORGIE
I mean, a shady government organisation turns up faster than the emergency services to deal with a fire at what is clearly a training facility for psychic children, and that doesn't scream Aliens to you?

CELIA
Yea Probably.

GEORGIE
I was thinking of doing an episode about them at one point since they've cropped up in a few weird scenarios but literally everything I could find about them was just incredibly boring. Just not good pod.

Beat.

GEORGIE
Speaking of... I don't think this one's working.

CELIA
(coming back)
What? What makes you say that?

GEORGIE
This episode. The energy's been all over the place.

CELIA
I'm sure it's fine-

GEORGIE

Are you ok? Everything alright with Jack?

CELIA

Oh yeah it's fine. You're sure the episode isn't working?

GEORGIE

I don't know. I wanted to tie it all together, but it's feeling choppy. I think we should call it.

CELIA

If you're sure? I don't have time to record another episode today.

GEORGIE

That's okay I could do a solo special on Alien abductions and-

CELIA

Sounds great. Listen, I've got something I need to check up on before Jack wakes up so drop me a text after, let me know how it goes and we'll try and sort something next week yeah?

GEORGIE

Oh er yeah that sounds-

FX. CELIA hangs up.

GEORGIE

(cont.)

fun.

She sighs. Captain Barker stirs.

GEORGIE
(cont.)
Come on you.

Recording ends without outro.

Music.

ANNOUNCER
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Sheeple Chase was created by Sasha Sienna, directed by April Sumner, and based on the works of Jonathan Sims and Alexander J Newall.

This episode was written by Sasha Sienna and edited with additional materials by Jonathan Sims and Alexander J Newall, with audio edits by Nico Vettese, mastering by Meg McKellar, and music by Nico Vettese.

It featured Sasha Sienna as Georgie Barker and Lowri Ann Davies as Celia Ripley.

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